

## 22 What is a Family?<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Definitions

We are used to distinguishing between the “nuclear family” and the “extended family.” The First Testament makes an overlapping distinction between the *bet* (or *bet-ab*) and the *mishpahah*.<sup>2</sup> Both words can be translated “family”, though more often *bet/bet-ab* is translated “house[hold]/father’s house.” So if we want to know what the First Testament says about the family, passages in the English Bible that speak of the “house[hold]” are at least as significant as passages that speak of the “family.” Here I will use the words “household” and “kin-group” as equivalents for the Hebrew words for the family in these two senses.

A household might in theory comprise up to four generations: middle-aged and/or elderly parents, their grown-up/married children, and their dependents (plus servants, if any). Such a household might well have to spread itself over several of kind of Israelite dwellings that can be seen in significant numbers in towns such as Beersheba and in the villages where most people lived. Within any one such community (a village or town) a further number of the houses would presumably then be occupied by other households from the same kin-group. But the fact that Israelites referred to this entity as a household points to these people all occupying one house, which would reflect the harsh realities of life. Factors such as short life-expectancy would mean that in practice one household would be the kind of number that could live together in this way. The Ruth story illustrates the way tragedy could decimate a potentially large household.

In theory, then, a household was what we might see as an extended family, but in practice the relationship between a household and a kin-group might be comparable to that between a nuclear and an extended family. The arrangement differs from that in Western societies in that the households would more often live close by each other. But this is not invariably the case; in the Ruth story, again, Elimelech’s household moves away from the rest of the kin-group for economic reasons, as happens in the modern world.

The Ruth story also illustrates how there can be more than one household/kin group pattern as it pictures two women living together for a period, while in the English Bible the next story (1 Sam 1) concerns a family comprising one man, two women, and (in due course) the children of both, while the daughters of Zelophehad are allowed in effect to become a family so that they are in a position to inherit their father’s property when he has no sons (Num 27). These provide illustrations of the assumption that there is a usual pattern of family structuring involving a man and woman and their children, but that this does not have to be maintained dogmatically.<sup>3</sup> Although Gen 1 makes both the subduing of the world and the growth of the

<sup>1</sup> Not previously published.

<sup>2</sup> See N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979/London: SCM, 1980), pp. 285-92; J. R. Porter, *The Extended Family in the Old Testament* (London: Edutext, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. Brenner, “Female Social Behaviour,” *VT* 36 (1986): 257-73 = Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 204-21.

family both men and women's business, the story of Hannah and Samuel assumes that in Israelite culture, as traditionally in ours, the early upbringing of children is their mother's work (cf. Exod 2:1-10).

In terms of its theological or moral significance, the family occupies a place midway between marriage and the state. On one hand, the creation stories offer an account of the origin of marriage and declare God's blessing on it, which they do not do for the family or the state. On the other, 1 Samuel offers an account of the origin of the monarchic state that is much more critical of it, on the grounds that monarchy threatens God's position as Israel's leader; there is no such fundamental critique of marriage or the family. In between these, the family is neither blessed nor critiqued, but simply taken for granted. Biblical stories then illustrate how it can work for good or ill. This might fit with a tendency in the New Testament to declare judgment on the state in the light of an assertion that God rules in Jesus, to continue to affirm the position of marriage, and to put the family in its place, along with other structures that depend on blood ties such as the distinctive position of Israel.

## 2 The Family in Israel's Story

The words for family appear most often in passages such as Num 1 - 4; 26; Josh 13 - 22. For Israel as for us, the family is often chiefly an administrative convenience, useful for the purpose of the ancient equivalents to assessing the community charge, though also for the distributing of land. In contrast, words for family do not appear in Gen 1 - 6; indeed, the only allusion to kin-groups in Gen 1 - 9 is a reference to the animals leaving the ark by kin-groups in Gen 8:19. All this goes to show that one cannot do theology with a concordance, because the unnamed family is central to the story of the world's origins. Genesis 1 - 2 doubtless presupposes that the blessing of procreation will work itself out in families, for that was the experience of the tellers and hearers of the story. It is more explicit that the curse of death works itself out in families. Eve is warned about the pain of motherhood, not merely the pain of giving birth but the pain of family strife such as the next chapter describes, where the Bible's first domestic scene is one that combines worship and murder.

It is as a household (Gen 7:1) that Mr and Ms Noah and their sons with their wives (no children are mentioned) find escape from world judgment, and as a family that they then demonstrate that this was not because they were better than anyone else. The opening scenes that follow the first creation (Gen 4) and the renewal of creation (Gen 9:20-27) thus open up a theme that runs through the First Testament and through contemporary experience, that the family is regularly the locus of strife and immorality.

The ambiguity of the family is clear in the stories of Abram and Sarai. Finding God's blessing involves leaving kin-group and household (Gen 12:2), but in a sense to start a new one. The family continues to be the natural structure through which God's blessing finds fruition. More specifically, it is the structure through which the vulnerable find protection. After his father's death Lot becomes his grandfather's responsibility, and on his grandfather's death becomes the responsibility of Abram as his eldest uncle: within Terah's kin-group, Lot belongs to the household of Haran, then to that of Terah

himself, then to that of Abram (Gen 11 – 12). He is never on his own until he is big and powerful enough to make this both possible and necessary (Gen 13), and even then Abram is morally obliged to intervene on his behalf when he gets into trouble (Gen 14).

The promise of blessing presupposes the natural human instinct to have children. In Abram and Sarai's case that leads to surrogate parenthood and to unhappiness throughout the family (Abram, Sarai, Hagar, Ishmael). Lot's story in due course adds further family sexual immorality to this story of family strife (Gen 19).

The most elaborate account of the reality of family strife in Genesis is the story of Jacob's sons, true sons of their father in his own relationship with his twin brother. Jacob's favoritism for his next-to-youngest son Joseph colludes with Joseph's dream of being in a position of power over his brothers, which generates deeper resentment in them but no intervention from Jacob. The failure to grasp the nettle in the family exacts a terrible price, the situation being made worse by complicated relationships within the family that issue from the children having the same father but different mothers; something of the dynamic parallels the complications in our own society when divorce and remarriage generate complex sets of interweaving families whose children may have mothers and fathers, step-mothers and step-fathers, and possibly brothers/sisters, half-brothers/sisters, and/or step-brothers/step-sisters. Joseph in due course has opportunity to exact a price from his brothers, but eventually the family is reunited, though realistically the scars remain, and once Jacob is dead the brothers are not sure the reconciliation will stick. And the whole story is set in the context of the purpose of God, who is not said to have inspired the dream, but does seem to make it come true, and uses the conflicts in the family to preserve the family and fulfill a purpose for it and through it.

In the family of David both sex and strife are problems. Belonging to David's household does not mean everyone living together; Absalom lives separately from David and Amnon. David is capable of feeling angry when his son Amnon rapes his half-sister, but like Jacob he does nothing; the overall comment regarding his parenting of another son is that he had never antagonized him by criticizing him (1 Kings 1:6). One key to the portrayal of David is that his story interweaves decisiveness in the realm of politics with feebleness in the private realm that often also spells disaster in the public realm.<sup>4</sup> When Absalom has Amnon killed, David simply weeps. When Absalom then flees, David simply mourns, and later allows him to return to Jerusalem but will not see him. When David allows him to foment revolt, Absalom lets Ahitophel try to kill David, and when Absalom dies David is simply grieved. David knows how to fight but not how to relate to people – men, women, or family.

The First Testament story matter-of-factly recognizes the family's potential for both blessing and abuse. It contains no shred of romanticism about the family; with hindsight, we can see it had the potential to preserve us from failing to expect family life within the church to be characterized by sexual abuse and other forms of violence and strife. It prohibits us from

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<sup>4</sup> K. R. R. Gros Louis, "The Difficulty of Ruling Well: King David of Israel," *Semeia* 8 (1977): 15-33, reprinted in Gros Louis (ed.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) 2:204-19.

naivety about what family life within the church will be like behind the curtains. It suggests no assumption that the cycle of abuse and violence can be broken. It does suggest that God can set limits to its death-dealing work (Cain and Abel), stand by the victims and rework the divine scheme of things so that they have a place within it (Hagar and Ishmael), work miracles in individual broken families (Jacob and Esau), bring good out of what human beings intend as evil (Joseph), or at least stay with it and move on (David).

### 3 The Family in Israel's Rule of Life

In several senses the rule of life expressed in what we call Israel's laws follows from its story. One of the senses in which this is so is that this rule of life is concerned to try to set limits to the rule of strife and immorality that the stories recognize is the reality of human life inside the people of God as well as outside it.

Thus the community needs a rule of life for the family that recognizes the reality of sexual immorality within it. Leviticus 18 and 20 systematically prohibit many forms of sexual relations within the kin-group. There are doubtless a number of socio-economic, anthropological, and theological reasons for these prohibitions,<sup>5</sup> but these include a desire to safeguard family order, the structured arrangement of marriage and family. Another potential role of the prohibitions is to signal the outlawing of various relationships in which abuse takes place.

Other imperatives urge the responsibilities of children for parents and offer safeguards against the instinct for strife and selfishness in the family (e.g., Exod 20:12; Lev 20:9; Deut 27:16; cf. Prov 19:26; 23:22-25; 28:24). The main corresponding imperative regarding the responsibility of parents for children is the repeated reminder to teach them about the gospel and its demands (Deut 4:9; 6:7, 20-25; 11:19; 32:46). There are few practical imperatives regarding the obligations of parents (see Deut 21:15-17). This may reflect the fact that it is parents who draw up the instructions (cf. Deut 21:18-21!), though the balance will also reflect the temptation for grown-up children to cease to look after their parents when they need this, a temptation with which Western society is familiar.

While the family can easily be the means whereby people are led astray religiously (Deut 13:6-11), it also has the potential to be the social structure of festivity before Yahweh (Deut 12:7; 14:26; 15:20). The Ruth story illustrates how the kin-group provides a structure of responsibility or a safety net when families break down. Leviticus's dream of a periodic year when debts are cancelled and transactions reversed is concerned for the restoration of the familial status quo (Lev 25:10, 41); it also presupposes the assumption that underlies the Ruth story, that the members of a person's kin-group have a moral obligation to take practical action on their behalf when (for instance) they are overtaken by debt.

The assumption that the family cares for its members no doubt underlies the way the family becomes Deuteronomy's model for the working

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., A. Brenner, "On Incest," in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 113-38; C. Pressler, "Sexual Violence and Deuteronomic Law," in the same volume, pp. 102-12.

of society.<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy is very fond of referring to people's fellow-Israelites as their brothers: it encourages people to see Israel as the family writ large.<sup>7</sup> The fact that other members of the community are your brothers is a fact to take into account when they have financial difficulties or are due to be released from indentured labor or are liable for punishment – or are guilty of perjury (Deut 15:1-12; 25:4; 19:18-19). The fact that other members of the community are the brothers of Israel's judges, kings, Levites, and prophets (Deut 1:18; 17:14-20; 18:1-18) needs to affect both their attitude to the people they lead and the people's attitude to their needs.<sup>8</sup> Israel's rule of life thus makes explicit a need implicit in its stories, that the presence of abuse within family life means that the community has to establish practical policies to safeguard the weak. At the same time the fact that the family becomes a model for life in society indicates that it could be a place where people experienced love.

## 4 The Family in Israel's Nightmares and Visions

For the prophets, too, the family can be a model for the community of faith. Ezekiel is especially fond of seeing Israel as a family, a household, "the household of Israel"; a rebellious household (Ezek 2; 3; 12). In Ezek 16 and 23 relations within the family provide the metaphor for portraying the people's history (cf. also Isa 1:2). In Hos 1 – 3 relations within the family provide the metaphor for portraying the people's coming destiny.

This metaphor is used in the context of the patriarchal family (patriarchal over against egalitarian, not over against matriarchal or fratriarchal). The use of the family metaphor in this way risks incidentally degrading the women and children who appear in the metaphor and further imperiling their position in the family and everywhere else.<sup>9</sup> Apparently God was prepared to take that risk in seeking to get through to the men who led Israel in its waywardness.

The degradation of women and children is a matter of literal reality as well as metaphor. The prophets in particular recognize the way the sins of fathers are visited on their (wives and) children, which happens in their day as it does in ours, as they also enjoy the positive fruit of the fathers' lives and work if they are more fortunate. Children (and wives) are bound up in the bundle of life with the fathers, for good and for ill. When a man is wayward, his wife and his children share the trouble that comes to him (e.g., Amos 7:17), partly because a family tends to be involved with its "head" in his wrongdoing as well as in its fruits (Jer 3:25; 11:10; 31:29).

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<sup>6</sup> See J. Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 134-66.

<sup>7</sup> The point is not so clear in NRSV and TNIV because of their commitment to gender-inclusive translation.

<sup>8</sup> See H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), pp. 196-97.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., T. D. Setel, "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea," in L. M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), pp. 86-95; R. J. Weems, "Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?" in K. G. Cannon and E. Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Interpretation for Liberation* (*Semeia* 47, 1989), pp. 87-104.

The good news is that if the family of Israel is to be destroyed, it is also destined to be rebuilt (Ezek 37:11 and the context; 39:11). And fortunately the prophetic nightmare that threatens to further the oppressiveness of the patriarchal family is accompanied by a prophetic vision that subverts the patriarchal hierarchy of the family. Children will be able to escape the influence of their parents, so they will no longer follow their parents in sin and die (Jer 31:29-30). Both Yahweh's sons and Yahweh's daughters will be brought back from the ends of the earth; all of them are called by Yahweh's name and created for Yahweh's glory, purposefully and individually shaped and made by Yahweh (Isa 43:6-7). Women share with men in the fullness of a family relationship with Yahweh in the present, and they will thus share in the future in the fullness of Yahweh's ingathering. Both sons and daughters are to prophesy, and ageism and classism are also subverted (Joel 2:28-29 [3:1-2]). The strife between parents and children (cf. Micah 7:6) is to be brought to an end (Mal 4:6 [3:24]). That is promise not demand, but it puts children into a position of responsibility to do their own turning rather than making their membership of a family an excuse for having no control of their destiny, for casting themselves into the role of victim (Ezek 18).

The prophetic vision offers empowerment to the victims of the patriarchal family.

## 5 The Family in Israel's Life Experience

The life and experience of the ordinary family feature in Proverbs, the Song of Songs, Job, and the Psalms.

In Proverbs, the family is the place of learning. Although its opening verse speaks of Proverbs' wisdom as Solomon's and might thus imply that education is the business of the state, the king soon disappears and mother and father are the source of insight for their children (e.g., Prov 1:8, 10; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21). Specifically they are the source of insight for their sons, which raises the question where the mothers and the other discerning women who appear in the book gained their insight and how insight came to be personified as a woman (e.g., Prov 1:20-33). Perhaps it is intuitive; only men have to be told. Or perhaps the explicit concern with sons reflects Proverbs' links with education for community leadership that was largely confined to men. This would suggest that there is an element of metaphor in the address to sons, but that the metaphor presupposes such a literal reality in the background. On the other hand, women could work in the civil service as scribes and messengers,<sup>10</sup> so Proverbs would have been relevant to them and needed by them, and the reference to "sons" may not be designed to exclude daughters.

Consideration of training for leadership draws attention again to the fact that whenever the First Testament refers to sons and daughters, it likely has adults in mind. In light of the First Testament's experience and ours that the family is the locus of sex and violence, it is striking that the first topic in Proverbs is violence and that the dominant one in the chapters that follow is sex; money is also a recurrent theme. The parents who reckon to offer their children advice on these topics will need to heed it themselves if their advice

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<sup>10</sup> See S. A. Meier, "Women and Communication in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111 (1991): 540-47.

is not to be sham. That need will be reinforced by the fact that teaching on violence, sex, and money is set in the context of teaching on relationships with God. Family learning on one of these areas cannot be divorced from family learning on the other, because the realities themselves interweave in the way God makes life work.

The other side of the coin of the parental anxiety in Prov 1 - 9 is the need reflected in the Song of Songs for a young man and woman to have space as they find a new brother and sister in each other. The sense that your parents (or your siblings) are always looking over your shoulder is not likely to keep you out of trouble and is quite likely to alienate you from them.

In Job, the family is the place of pain. Perhaps this is so under the surface in Proverbs; its anxious fantasies about the young man yielding to the blandishments of teenage rogues or a beguiling woman or easy money suggest the nightmares of parents as their children grow beyond the years when they are under parental control. Sons can be a source of sorrow, grief, and bitterness as well as joy (Prov 10:1; 15:20; 17:25). Job is the story of a man who does his absolute best for his family; the height of the description is the fact that Job is a person who prays for his children continually. It is precisely for that reason that he has to watch it all fall apart. His children grow up and all get on famously with each other, unlike Jacob's or David's. While they are doing so they are all killed. When Job himself is overcome by affliction, his wife can take it no longer. Job is left alone with God.

At the end of the story his family is rebuilt. We will not be able to see how ten more children can truly compensate for the loss of the first ten, nor in what state all this left Ms Job (who was old enough to have ten grown-up children before she started on the next ten), but an important point is made by the fairy-tale "so they all lived happily ever after" ending. The fiction embodies the promise that somehow God does make things work out aright, and that this promise applies to families, even if we cannot see how this can be possible.

That the family is a place of healing is a more inferential point.<sup>11</sup> The Psalms presuppose that people in pain have contexts in which they can articulate their physical, emotional, or spiritual need, and in which other people can then minister God's healing to them, or simply stay with them in their pain. The context of that prayer ministry is sometimes the institutional ministry of temple or other sanctuary, as classically in the story of Hannah in 1 Sam 1. But that story located at the annual pilgrimage festival implicitly shows how such ministry cannot cope with people's all-year-round needs. What happened for the other 51 weeks of the year? The family may again have been the answer. The kin-group would be the "natural" body to offer support and prayer and to facilitate a person's restoration to society, of which it was the most immediate embodiment. First Testament faith, like ours, then presupposed that involvement with a small group complemented involvement with the corporate worship of the large congregation, if a person's kin-group provided them with their small group. It is a form of family therapy, though in Israel's case not one presupposing that it is the family that is "ill."

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<sup>11</sup> See E. Gerstenberger, *Der bittende Mensch* (Neukirchen: Neuchirchener, 1980), conveniently summarized in P. D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), pp. 6-7.

As one might expect, it is the poetic books with their experiential base that most directly address everyday life issues as these affect the family, though they only do directly what appears less directly in story, rule of life, and nightmare and vision. Together these four ways of speaking acknowledge the realities of family life, indicate agenda for it, and suggest hopes for it.